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House Democracy Partnership Sees Opportunity in Changing Middle East

by **Sara Sorcher**

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Tunisia and Egypt ousted their longtime autocrats; Lebanon's government is now dominated by Hezbollah and its allies; American troops are preparing to leave Iraq. But Reps. **David Dreier**, R-Calif., and **David Price**, D-N.C., say the rapidly changing region could mean new opportunities for American lawmakers to help their peers — or peers-to-be — build functioning democratic institutions.

The chairman and ranking member of the House Democracy Partnership returned on Monday from those countries, where they explored how seasoned U.S. legislators might share wisdom gained from years of scrutinizing budgets and developing oversight with leaders of emerging democracies. The HDP already has 13 such programs in place in other countries.

The delegation including Reps. **Keith Ellison**, D-Minn., **Gwen Moore**, D-Wis., and **Jim McDermott**, D-Wash., also visited Lebanon, which already hosts an HDP program, but it was the first time members have visited the country since Hezbollah's coalition secured a ruling majority in the new government.

The House Democratic Partnership, founded six years ago, is modeled on a similar commission from the early 1990s that focused on Eastern and Central Europe after the demise of the Soviet Union. Price said that so far HDP hasn't seen many "promising entry points" for programs in the Mideast and North Africa, as many countries didn't have the key mix of both "some parliamentary history and some desire to work with us."

"The Middle East is obviously not the hotbed of parliamentary development," Price told *National Journal* in a joint interview with Dreier before the trip, published this week due to security concerns about revealing their travel plans. "This Arab Spring is very exciting — the idea that we can be there ready to engage with these new parliamentarians that are elected, we can have a constructive role in helping them build their institutions."

Iraq

In Iraq, the American lawmakers welcomed the news that the country's legislature would officially begin a partnership program with HDP. As the remaining American troops are slated to withdraw by the end of the year, Dreier said he hopes a program there would help in "bringing about a modicum of stability" to a parliament that has operated "in fits and starts."

The speaker of Iraq's parliament extended an invitation to the lawmakers to launch a program as they met with several committee chairs and rank-and-file members. But the bloc run by the anti-American Shiite cleric Moktada al-Sadr did not send anyone to participate in these meetings, even though they themselves have emerged as technocrats and advocated government reforms.

The HDP delegation extended invitations to a handful of Iraqi MPs identified as key reformers to visit Washington and participate in training sessions focused on committee operations.

With the security situation still volatile in the country, Price cautioned that "the work of any of these institutions is going to be dependent on the overall security and stability."

Tunisia & Egypt

As HDP lawmakers consider starting a program with Egyptian and Tunisian parliaments, there's one technical glitch: With elections expected later this year, their peers in these countries haven't been elected yet.

"This is obviously a very preliminary look," Dreier said. Even though HDP has historically focused on some of the world's newest countries – like East Timor and Kosovo – this is the earliest the group has looked into partnering with a nascent democracy.

Members of the delegation met with a wide cross-section of what are virtually sure to be the major players in Egypt and Tunisia's political systems, including popular Islamist groups like Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Tunisia's Al Nahda. Any group that renounces violence and accepts entry into the political process, Dreier said, "we're willing to meet."

HDP is careful to avoid being perceived as exporting America's version of democracy, Dreier said. Rather than "coming in with the answers ... we simply share our experiences."

"I like to joke that maybe after seeing the United States Congress in operation, they'll want to go to totalitarianism in their countries," Dreier continued. "But the fact is, we do have this two-and-a-quarter-century experience that we want people to be able to see – the pluses and the minuses of it."

There were some points they stressed to Egyptians, such as the need for international observers in the upcoming elections and for tolerating opposition. “We’re not trying to preach to them. It’s as colleagues,” Price said of the advice.

Lebanon

Since HDP’s program began in Lebanon in 2006, Beirut’s legislature has seen long periods where it was largely paralyzed by sectarian tensions or did not meet at all. “You go into the parliament and the dust is on the desks,” Price said.

A defunct parliament could be even more challenging going forward. Hezbollah lawmakers brought down Beirut’s fragile U.S.-backed government earlier this year; they then forced the appointment of a prime minister tied to their party. Both Dreier and Price, who cannot meet with members of a group the U.S. considers a foreign terrorist organization, watched the toppling of Saad Hariri’s government in January very carefully.

“When you see governments crumble, when you have everyone with whom you’ve worked, gone -- and all of the sudden you have an entirely new team of people -- it makes it challenging,” Dreier said.

The delegation met with President Michel Suleiman on Friday and also with representatives of Prime Minister Najib Mikati, who was out of the country.

“Lots of our colleagues are concerned about Hezbollah’s possible influence.... There are questions about how they’re going to conduct themselves,” Price said. “Having a functioning parliament complements our U.S. objectives very nicely, but it is an uphill struggle to [see] that parliament have a degree of independence and integrity that it really should have.”

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